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SUBJECT: VIETNAM'S PERSPECTIVES ON DECEMBER ASEAN SUMMITS

REF: A) STATE 123211, B) HANOI 1311

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Anxieties about political unrest notwithstanding, Vietnam considers the December 15-18 ASEAN summits to be among the most important diplomatic events of the year and will be sending a large delegation. MFA and think tank contacts confirm that the global financial crisis will be a major topic of discussion and highlighted the ASEAN+3 Chiang Mai Initiative as the region's principle response. Our contacts expressed hope that the ASEAN Charter will enhance the body's standing with its partners, rationalize its organizational structure, and streamline decision-making; however, they stressed that ASEAN will remain consensus-driven and reluctant to interfere in member states' internal affairs. "Hectic" negotiations continue on ASEAN's human rights body, with no consensus yet on its mandate, staffing, and funding. Burma will not feature highly on the agenda, according to our contacts, although it will likely be discussed by ARF and between ASEAN and the United Nations. END SUMMARY.

ANXIETY... MIXED WITH A BIT OF SCHADENFREUDE

2. (SBU) Vietnam considers the December 15-18 ASEAN summits to be the highlight of its diplomatic calendar, explained MFA ASEAN Department Director Pham Minh Thu. MFA contacts would not comment on foreign press reports that Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos had requested that the meetings be delayed; however, there is clear concern that political instability in Thailand might disrupt the events. According to MFA America's Division DDG Le Chi Dung, Vietnam has arranged to send its 160-person delegation through a military airfield near Bangkok. Still, amid the concern and professed sympathy, one could detect a smidgen of delight, thinly suppressed, at the Thais' predicament. "In the end it's their problem," shrugged Nguyen Vu Tung of the MFA-affiliated Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV). Asked about the Thai government's capacity to host such a large and complicated gathering, Thu commented (somewhat elliptically) that ASEAN's theme song -- chosen this year in a region-wide competition -- was, after all, composed by a Thai.

NEW ASEAN CHARTER, OLD "ASEAN WAY"

3. (SBU) Whatever their feelings about the summit itself, our contacts waxed enthusiastic about the ASEAN charter, which takes effect December 15, even if the commemoration ceremony itself is delayed or canceled. Both Tung and Thu highlighted the fact that under its new charter, ASEAN will enjoy standing as a legal entity. Previously, an agreement with ASEAN was technically a collection of ten separate agreements, which could be broken by any party; now, agreements will be with ASEAN itself. This, Tung argued, will not only enhance ASEAN's ability to conduct external business, it will help compel consensus within the Association. Similarly, by

bringing ASEAN's sprawling collection of councils, committees, and sub-committees under three pillars -- and by subordinating these to a coordinating council and permanent secretariat in Jakarta -- the Charter will not only make for a more efficient structure, it will ensure more streamlined decision-making.

14. (SBU) Our contacts emphasized that ASEAN will remain a consensus-driven association -- "intergovernmental, not supranational," as the MFA's Thu put it -- and that decision-making will continue to be based on consultation. What will change, Tung noted, is the degree to which the process is institutionalized, with more regularized channels for persuasion and compromise. And this, Tung speculated, could make ASEAN as a whole less timid, particularly on sensitive topics.

FINANCIAL CRISIS: ASEAN AND THE CHIANG MAI INITIATIVE

15. (SBU) The ongoing global financial turmoil will be a central topic at the summit meetings, our contacts said; however, the only concrete measure under discussion is the Chiang Mai Initiative, formed by the members of ASEAN+3. According to the DAV's Tung, there have been some proposals to double the Initiative's planned \$80 billion reserve and to refine "modalities" for disbursing support. Both Thu and Tung confirmed that financial assistance given under the Chiang Mai Initiative would likely come without IMF-style conditions.

HUMAN RIGHTS BODY

16. (SBU) The Terms of Reference for ASEAN's Human Rights Body are still being drafted, our contacts insisted. The MFA's Thu denied any urgency, saying that the aim was simply to have the body up and running by next year's ASEAN summit. He acknowledged differences

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among member states, but declined to characterize them, saying it was an "internal ASEAN matter." The DAV's Tung was more forthcoming, describing ongoing negotiations as "hectic." According to Tung, major differences remain over the body's mandate, staffing, and funding. Will the body have an investigative/monitoring function, or will it focus on capacity building; to whom will the body report; will there be permanent staff; will the body accept outside funding, and if so, for what purposes? Vigorous discussions on these and other central questions continue, Tung said, with older ASEAN members Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines arrayed against new members Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

BURMA

17. (SBU) Burma will not figure prominently on the agenda, our contacts contended, though it will almost certainly come up during the ARF summit and between ASEAN and the UN. Looking a bit farther ahead, Tung suggested that the streamlined decision-making procedures that come with the new ASEAN charter might make it more difficult for Burma to hide behind ASEAN's consensus-driven conservatism. Thu disagreed, offering Vietnam's standard line on non-intervention and the ASEAN way. (Note: See ref. B for a more complete analysis of ASEAN's place in Vietnam's Burma policy. End note.)